A FULL AND FAITHFUL LIFE
4. ASKING, SEARCHING, KNOCKING
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Psalm 25: 1-10
Matthew 7: 1-11

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." (Matthew 7:7)

We come to be fed – with food that will make us strong. So, feed us with the bread of life – which we know is your love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

People who know us best, the psychologist, physicians, sociologists, political scientists know that there is a lot of dis-ease, anxiety in the air at the moment. There is deep yearning for a full and faithful life, a palpable hunger. Valparaiso professor Dorothy Bass begins her fine book Practicing our Faith with an anecdote that sounds familiar.

"I never thought I'd be living this way. Somehow I imagined that life would be simpler. She has reached forty and she thinks she should have her life together by now, but things are just not right. Too few evenings include nourishing suppers with loved ones: too many are given over to the demands of work, or lost to worry and exhaustion. She finds community here and there, and she volunteers to help out as she can, but she is wary about getting too involved. Showing up at a PTA meeting, she has learned, probably means getting stuck with a fundraising assignment, so she increasingly stays away, in spite of her intense concern for her children. She does not feel good about this. 'This is not how I intended to live my life,' she sighs, turning from one task to the next." She sounds like people I know.

The woman's sighs, Dorothy Bass proposes, are only partly a result of having too much to do. More fundamentally they result when we lack a vision of an authentic, intentional, genuine, life-giving way of life.

There is a deep longing and yearning for that integrated, full and faithful life in all of us. Bass and others who are thinking and writing about the loss of Christian practices, are proposing that the Christian faith is an answer to that yearning, not only its theology, the way it sees the world, but its practices, the things Christians do in the world to follow Jesus, some of them very ancient, going all the way back to the earliest Christian church.

And so a series of sermons – on Christian Practices, using as our guide Jesus' own instructions to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, fasting by working for justice, learning to worry about important matters and to live confidently with the rest, praying, and this morning at the heart of it all, asking, searching, knocking.

"Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. If your child asks you for a piece of bread you would not give a stone or, worse yet, if she asks for fish – you would not give a snake. So, God will give good things if you ask."

In Luke's account there is a funny story about a man who is asleep on a mat on the floor of his one room house. It's midnight – his wife and children are on the floor with him. There's a knock on the door. The children stir, his wife opens one eye and pokes him in the back. He can't get to the door without crawling over his sleeping children, so in a loud whisper he asks:

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's me, Joshua, your neighbor. I need three loaves of bread."

"You what?"

"I need three loaves of bread. We just got company."

"You must be kidding. It's the middle of night. Come back in the morning."

And he settles back down on the mat, pulls up the covers.

Again, a knock, louder this time, pierces the darkness.

"Come on – just three loaves. Help me out here."

Now the children are awake and his wife says, "For crying out loud – will you just go and get him the bread?"

I think maybe Jesus had a twinkle in his eye when he told this story and maybe the disciples chuckled when they heard it. He concludes – if a slumbering man can be convinced to find bread for his neighbors – so God will give – the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

Jesus did not mean, or say, that God will give you whatever you want. But that is exactly what some people do believe: that God will find you a parking place on a rainy day; a God who will facilitate the sale of your condo or the approval of your mortgage; a God, the Prosperity Gospel preachers say, who will open the way for the house of your dreams if you believe and pray fervently enough: a slumbering God who can be prodded into action by your pleading and praying.

Jesus didn't believe in that kind of God. On the night of his betrayal and arrest, he went to a garden to pray and he asked God to deliver him from what was about to happen. From the cross he cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus did not believe in a God who fulfills every request. Every parent knows that you cannot and should not give a child everything he/she asks for.

But it does seem like that is what he is saying: that if you ask persistently enough you will get what you are asking for. But then there is the abrupt change in direction: God will give you good things, Jesus promised: things you really need. In Luke it is specific: God will give you the Holy Spirit. That is to say, God himself is what is given – and what you need. What we want is not the issue here – the job, the promotion, the win, the parking place. Jesus goes deeper and begins to deal with fundamental things: what you and I need most in the world. Something that God alone can provide.

I have never been comfortable with the notion that God grants favors based on the persistence of my praying. In the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at Children's Hospital I was by the bed bedside of a young child recovering from open heart surgery the day before. Surrounded by blinking monitoring devices, oxygen tanks, IVs, connected by tubes and wires, she was also surrounded by the love of her big caring family: parents, aunts and

uncles, grandparents, taking turns by her bedside and praying constantly, not only when a minister visited and asked everyone to stand around her bed holding hands while she prayed, but individually, I am sure, silently, "Dear God, make her well." In that room was another child, an infant, born prematurely, a tiny little thing: she was also connected by wires and tubes to a battery of monitors and machines providing nutrients and oxygen. I never saw anyone visit her. I asked and was told that no, she had no visitors. I concluded that she was probably abandoned, that no one even knew she was alive and no one knew she was here, except the wonderful nurses and hospital staff caring for her. I cannot bring myself to believe that God cares less, is less present to her, surrounds her with less healing love because no one is praying for her. I remind myself that one of our most precious beliefs is that she is written on the hand on God, too. She too is unforgettable. And it is that baby I think about when during the Sacrament of Baptism we pray for the baptized children, their parents and all the children of our congregation and community.

It always seems appropriate to confess that when religious professionals talk about God, there is always a possibility – the probability – that the professional will say more than is warranted: that when we are speaking about asking God to do something and God responding or not responding, what God is up to, it is important to be modest and acknowledge that there is mystery here. Preachers get in trouble when they claim to know all the truth about God; who God favors, who God heals, who God loves best. We simply don't know enough to make categorical statements like that. And so I am cautious about claiming that God answered my prayer and gave me what I asked for but, at the same time, I keep praying because Jesus told me to ask and seek and knock. What I am sure of is that things are different for me when I know someone is praying for me.

Episcopal theologian John Yungblut says that when he prays for someone – he becomes more sensitive, more concerned, more responsible. Something happens to me that I know is good," he says. But that's not all. Yungblut continues in a way I know is true because I have experienced it… "I believe every prayer works both for God and for the person. It does something. I don't want to try to say what it does because I don't understand it." And then he elaborates in a way I found helpful, "I feel confident that, in a world in which physical energies like light and sound and color and electrical charges can move invisibly and interconnect with matter in space, spiritual energies must also interconnect and

interpenetrate in some way as yet unknown. Therefore, in my prayer for my friend, I provide God an additional channel for the movement of his energies to my friend." (Rediscovering Prayer p.127)

And so, of course we ask God to bless and keep our dear ones and to be a healing presence, a comfort, a giver of strength and courage for friends in the hospital, for families grieving the loss of a dear one, for young men and women of our Armed Forces in harm's way, and a loving presence for children everywhere. And we pray for ourselves, for the resources and strength and courage and be the people God created us to be.

We ask, search, and knock – at Heaven's door all our lives – asking not so much for things, but for some sign that God is there, that, in our heart of hearts, God knows we are here and that our lives make some kind of final sense because God does provide what we most desperately need – namely God's own presence. God's own love.

That is what is so powerfully profound about what Jesus taught his disciples that day. We share with all religions the idea of a God who creates, a God who is holy and just and perfect. The radical heart of the faith Jesus taught is that God is personal, that God has a heart, that the Almighty Lord of the universe may be addressed intimately as Jesus did when he taught his disciples to pray – not Almighty, Omnipotent, Mysterious God, but "Our Father" and used a startlingly intimate word – Abba – a word little children use to address their father. The most radical idea I can think of is that the Creator of all is affected by what happens to me, that God finally is not an abstract philosophic concept, but a loving parent, the Father and Mother who loves each of us, as Augustine once said, as if there were only one of us to love. That is the most profound and the best idea in the world. A God who knows us and who, when we ask, and seek, and knock, comes to us, and opens to us…

Jesus was addressing the deepest human need of all, deeper in us than our need for food and drink, the need to be known and to be loved. Douglas John Hall says that the only prerequisite for prayer is not theological orthodoxy or heroic piety but "sufficient self-knowledge to recognize the depth of our need and enough humility to ask for help." The most authentic prayers Hall says, "emerge spontaneous, unplanned, out of real life":

"Help me."

“I can’t do this by myself.”
“It hurts so bad, make it stop.”
“Oh, Jesus, get me out of this mess.”
“Why did he have to die?”

Jesus taught his followers that when the situation is “knocking at the door in the middle of the night” urgent God will be there with whatever we most need – which is someone to be there.

We were in real need recently. Accustomed to assuring people of God’s gracious presence and praying to God on others’ behalf, I found myself very much in need of that assurance and those intercessions. Visits in the hospital by my clergy colleagues were not only welcome but like a drink of fresh cool water when you are parched with thirst. It simply felt good to hear someone else pray for us.

During that time it was my routine to leave for the hospital early in the morning, before the sun was up and return late at night. My ministers during that time, in addition to my colleagues and to all the good people who told us they were praying for us, interceding with God on our behalf, were the Door Men and Garage Attendants in our building. Every morning they said, “Tell the Mrs. I’m praying for her.” And at night, “How is she? I’m praying for her.” One, as I got out of my car, told me that the Bible study group he attends in his church had been praying for her. Another showed me his church bulletin with the prayer list on the back – and her name.

I don’t claim to understand but I do know those prayers were, and are, precious to me: they became a channel for God’s love and the assurance of God’s presence. It is the best promise in the world… You would not give a stone to a child who asked for bread. You would give bread and your love.

And so, bread – the bread of communion – is a sign of a love that will not let us go – and the God who will always be with us and give us what we need.

I slept a lot better knowing about those prayers and their simple but eloquent reminder that when you ask, it will be given, and when you seek, you will find, and be found and when you knock the door will be opened.

Thanks be to God.